



# Trends in the Food System Development Profession in the U.S. and Canada

## A Comparison of 2012 and 2019 Survey Results

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### Introduction

Food system development (FSD) work describes a broad range of efforts toward building and strengthening local and regional food systems by working with farmers, businesspeople, government agency staff, local residents, or other persons or entities. A key goal of FSD is creating or strengthening the viability, equity, and sustainability of food systems.

While Cooperative Extension and other national nonprofits and agencies have been working in this area for a long time, FSD is relatively new as a recognized area of practice, and the focus of the field has lacked coherence and comprehensiveness. In addition, FSD is new territory for many organizations and their staff or volunteers. Thus, the emerging field of FSD lacks solidly established foundations for practice.

We in the [North American Food Systems Network](#) (NAFSN) see vibrant local and regional food systems as critical components of productive, viable, and resilient communities that generate social well-being. We believe that improving practitioners' knowledge and skills can lead to more effective and efficient programs and policies for fostering the kind of food system development that is needed. Therefore, we ask, "What are the challenges and training needs of current and prospective food system development practitioners?"

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*Any errors or omissions in this report are the sole responsibility of the authors, not NAFSN.*

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In 2012, in collaboration with numerous partner organizations, the [Thomas A. Lyson Center for Civic Agriculture and Food Systems](#) conducted a survey of FSD practitioners on behalf of NAFSN. In that survey we targeted “food system development practitioners,” defined as anyone who, “as a significant portion of their work, uses community development strategies in working with farmers, businesspeople, government agency staff, local residents, or other persons or entities to create or strengthen the viability, equity, and sustainability of food systems.” The survey asked respondents about their work situations and needs for networking, information, and training. The resulting study of the 1,321 responses to that initial survey was published as the foundational [NAFSN White Paper](#) in 2014.

In spring 2019, NAFSN conducted a second survey using essentially the same questionnaire to discern how the field had developed and to ascertain trends in the professional development needs of FSD practitioners. The results reported here indicate emerging needs for the kind of information, training opportunities, and networking that can enable FSD practitioners to be effective in the important work of building and strengthening local and regional food systems. The 2019 results also show that many of the needs identified in 2012 remain relevant as opportunities to strengthen the field.

Overall, the data from the two surveys indicate some positive trends in FSD work as a profession, including expanding career opportunities (as evidenced by respondents who reported increased work hours and more full-time employment). It should be noted, however, that the 2012 baseline survey was conducted at the end of the Great Recession, a time when funding was particularly difficult to secure. Furthermore, the 2019 survey was conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic. A survey today might yield considerably different results. We strongly encourage food system scholars and professionals to read the JAFSCD special Issue on “The Impact of COVID-19 on the Food System” (<https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2021.102.054>).

In any case, our results suggest that the practice of FSD has yet to become solidly established, with respondents expressing vulnerability to the economy, dependence on grants, and having to respond to what is sometimes viewed as less-informed whims of employers and funders. Coupled with these concerns is increased demand for more convenient, self-paced training and professional development opportunities.

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## Summary of Key Findings

Below are some highlights of the 2019 survey results as they compare with the 2012 baseline survey results.

- **Working with socially disadvantaged groups was reported as the #1 need for training in 2019** (Figure 6). Need for training in value-adding strategies was tied with need for training related to food hubs (an item not included in the 2012 survey) for second in 2019.
- The challenges of **racial and cultural divides** and of **addressing the underlying causes of problems as opposed to symptoms of problems** were more much more commonly cited as challenges in 2019 than in 2012 (Figure 7).
- Interest in networking with **professionals within their specific technical fields** continued to be the top desired professional development opportunity. However, in 2019, respondents more commonly **cited interest in online training, an online portal with distance learning, and a food system development certification program**, while the interest expressed in more conventional training opportunities like conferences, live scheduled programs (e.g., webinars), and e-newsletters was lower (Figure 10).
- Larger shares of the 2019 respondents **expressed desire for increased funding, salary, benefits, and better utilization of their food systems expertise** than in 2012 (Figure 8).
- A notably larger share of the 2019 respondents were **staff members of nonprofits, institutions, and public agencies** than in 2012, while the share who were farmers or businesspersons was smaller (Figure 1).
- A larger share of respondents **reported working full-time** in 2019 (Figure 2).
- A significantly larger share of respondents **reported having more than 10 years of experience** in 2019 (Figure 3).
- **Despite disproportionately impacted communities of color, highly educated white women** continued to dominate the responding professionals.
- Responses to the item on the geographic focus of their work suggests a slight **trend toward a focus on larger geographic scales** as opposed to local and more on rural areas (Figure 4).

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- **The primary foci of food system development professionals** continued to be related to fostering knowledge, vision, and/or leadership, and increasing food security and access to healthy food (Figure 5).
  - Two-thirds of 2019 survey respondents considered themselves to be **food justice activists**, an item that was not included in the 2012 questionnaire. Of these, almost all expressed interest in participating in a paid leave-of-absence program for food justice activists.

## Methods

In 2012, in consultation with a group of national agriculture and FSD leaders, staff, and volunteers gathered by the Lyson Center for Civic Agriculture and Food Systems, NAFSN developed a questionnaire to discern the key needs of FSD professionals. The 2012 survey was put into SurveyMonkey and beta-tested, revised, and tested a second time. Because we were interested in how the field was changing, the 2019 questionnaire was essentially the same as the 2012 questionnaire. Responses to both surveys were anonymous unless individual respondents chose to share their contact information. We note that in 2012 the questionnaire was translated into French (for Quebec respondents), tested, and implemented, but that in 2019 we lacked the resources to implement the French version of the survey. For that reason, we use only the data from the 2012 English version in this report.

In both surveys we targeted self-identified “food system development practitioners” using a screening question in which an FSD practitioner was defined as someone who “as a significant portion of their work, uses community development strategies in working with farmers, businesspeople, government agency staff, local residents, or other persons or entities to create or strengthen the viability, equity, and sustainability of food systems.” This makes FSD practitioners a broad category that includes paid staff, consultants, volunteers, and activists working in agriculture and other kinds of food production, processing, distributing, marketing, and retailing, as well as in food security and food waste management.

In both surveys, we recruited participants through multiple postings on major national listservs, including NAFSN, COMFOOD, SANET, FOODPLANNING, and URBANAG. Due to a lack of resources in 2019, our outreach to national organizations for recruiting survey

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participants was more limited than in 2012. We believe that this explains, in part, why we received fewer responses in 2019 (664) than in 2012 (1,321).

Our goal for the 2019 survey was to assess how the FSD practice was changing. To accomplish this, we described basic trend changes using means, standard deviations, and percentages. To compare the responses to the same questions across the two surveys, we used cross-tabulations and Chi-square statistical tests to assess whether any observed response differences were large enough to be statistically significant. When Chi-square tests indicated that observed differences were large enough to be actual differences 95% of the time, as opposed to having a different mix of the same population responding, we interpreted the differences as showing change. Not surprisingly for a seven-year period in a newly emerging field of practice, we found only a modest number of notable changes. Nevertheless, we are confident we received sufficient responses in both years to explore and analyze the situations and needs of practitioners as well as to discern new trends.

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## Results

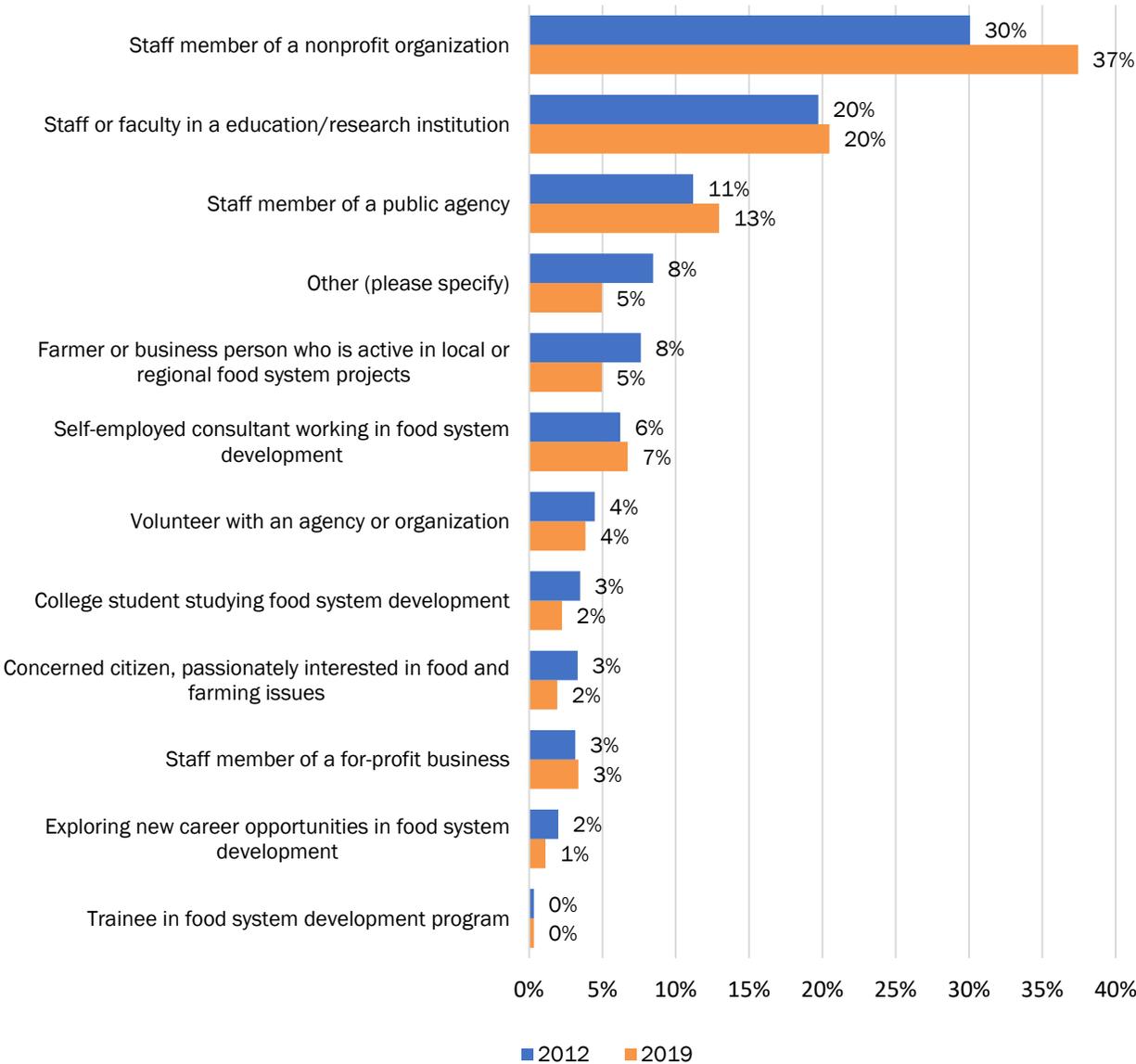
### Food System Development Employment

In 2012 we sought to gain an understanding of the employment situations of FSD professionals, so in that survey we asked a series of questions about types of employers, hours worked per week in FSD, length of employment (tenure), geographic area of their work, and topics on which they focused. To learn how the occupation of FSD professionals has been changing over time, we asked the same questions in our 2019 survey. As our results presented below indicate, while the field is changing in some positive directions, much remains the same, and this indicates a need for continued support of those working in the field.

**Occupation Classification**

Our results show that nonprofit organizations, educational institutions, and public agencies continue to be the primary employers of FSD professionals (see Figure 1). However, the share of respondents reporting they served as staff of nonprofit organizations grew from 30% to 37% between 2012 and 2019, a statistically significant increase ( $p=0.002$ ). During the same period, the share of respondents identifying themselves as a “farmer or businessperson who is active in local or regional food system projects” dropped by 3 percentage points.

**Figure 1. Which ONE of the following best describes your current food system development situation? (2012  $N=1,207$ ; 2019  $N=625$ )**

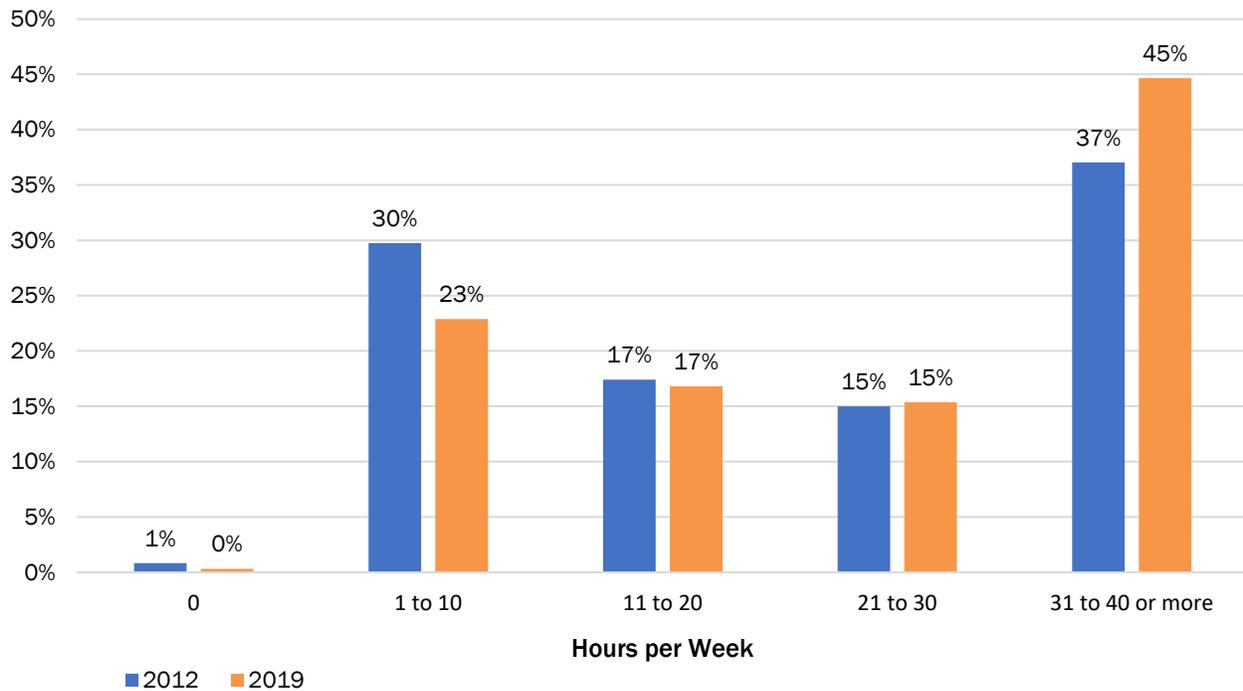


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## Level of Employment

The results presented in Figure 2 show that the share of respondents reporting that they work 1 to 10 hours declined between 2012 and 2019, while the share reporting 31 or more hours increased significantly, from 37% in 2012 to 45% in 2019 ( $p < 0.001$ ). These results suggest that food systems work may be evolving into a more stable occupation.

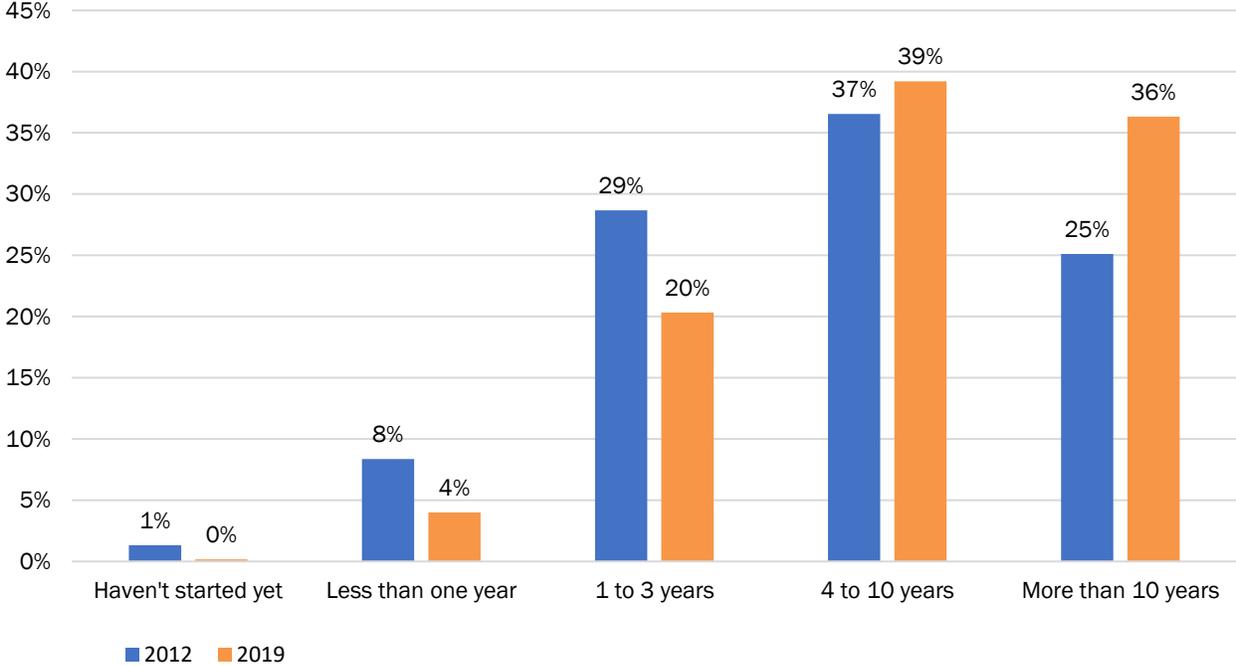
**Figure 2. About how many hours per week do you currently spend on food system development work? (2012  $N=1,207$ ; 2019  $N=625$ )**



### Tenure as a Food System Development Professional

We were also interested in discerning the extent to which FSD work was providing career opportunities, as evidenced by trends in the length of time that respondents reported doing FSD work. Figure 3 shows that the 2019 survey respondents with three or fewer years of work in the field represented a smaller share than in 2012, while the 2019 share with four years or greater experience was significantly larger. As with the increase in hours worked per week on food systems, the increase in the number of years worked supports the idea that FSD work may be maturing as a profession. Overall, the difference between 2012 and of 2019 is statistically significant ( $p < 0.001$ ).

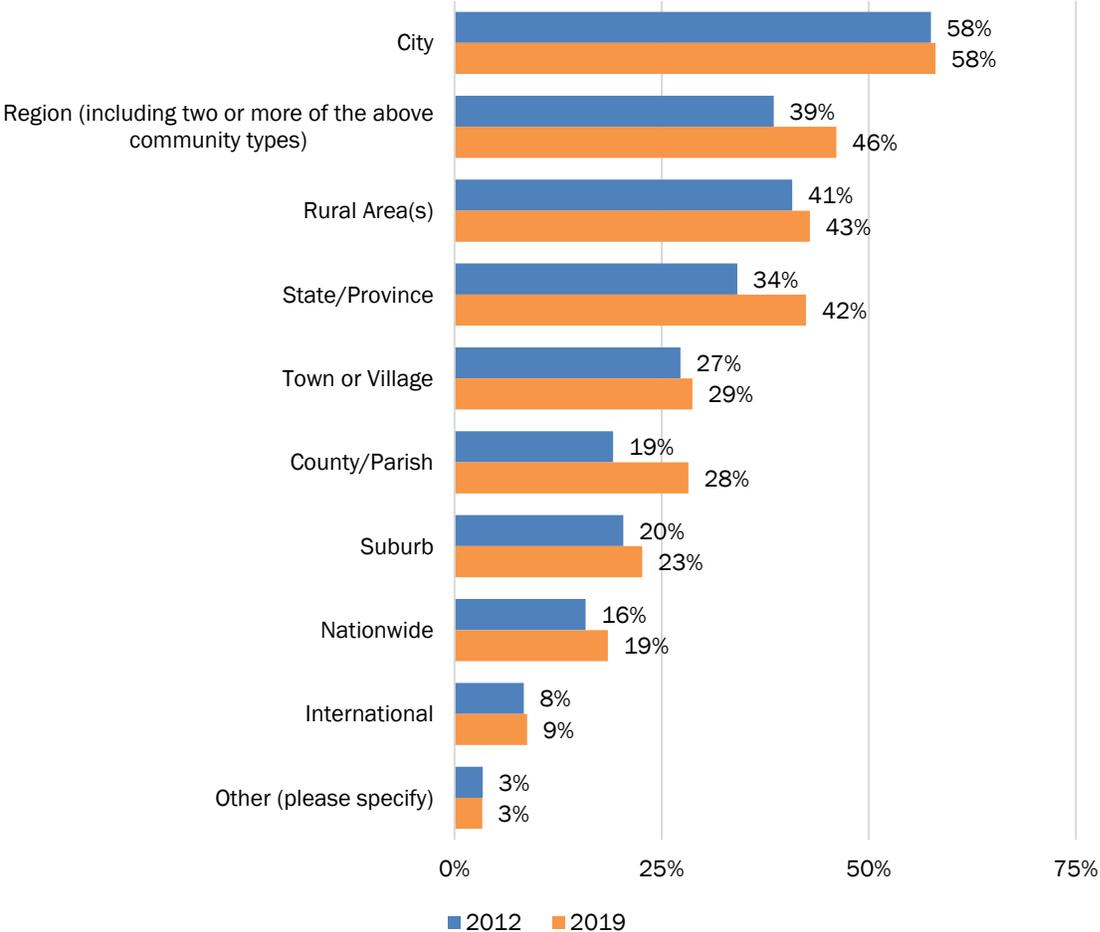
**Figure 3. How long have you been doing food system development work?**  
(2012  $N=1,207$ ; 2019  $N=625$ )



**Geographic Area Working In**

Figure 4 shows that respondents' work foci were widely distributed across the range from local to international, with a city being the most common focus. Larger proportions of the 2019 respondents indicated rural area(s), region, and town or village than in 2012. The slight increases in almost all categories suggest that FSD practitioners are working across more geographic boundaries, and this may indicate that their work is coming to better reflect the reality that food systems can simultaneously engage communities across a rural-urban spectrum. This idea is also supported by the largest increase in focus being the "region" category.

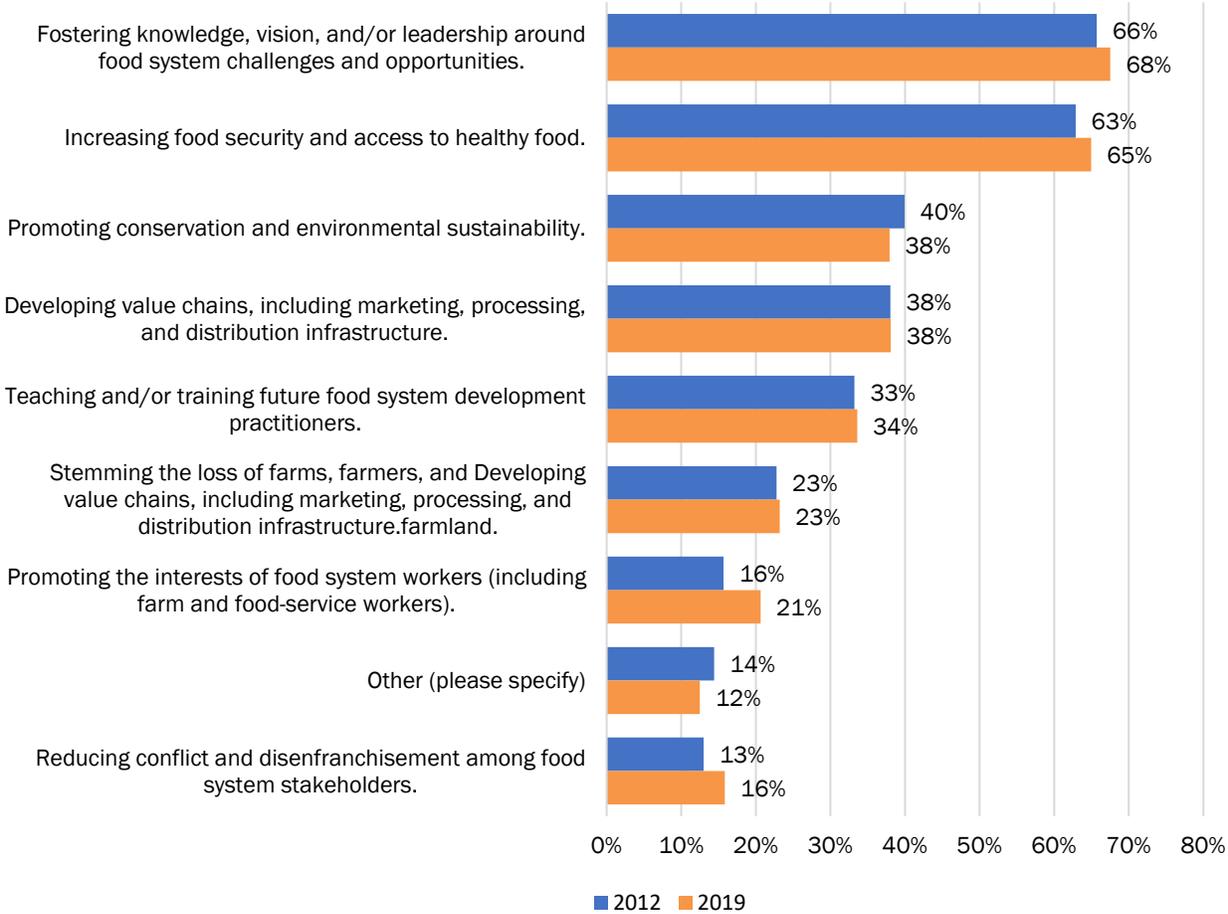
**Figure 4. Check the boxes of the geographic area(s) you work in. (2012 N=1,207; 2019 N=625)**



### Food System Development Issues Worked On

FSD encompasses a wide range of issues spanning the food system’s three principal domains: production, distribution, and consumption. We wanted to ascertain the extent to which the foci of FSD professionals might be changing over time. Over the seven years, the percent of issue focus and the rank order of focus stayed remarkably stable (see Figure 5). The one notable exception was promoting the interests of food system workers, which increased 5 percentage points.

**Figure 5. Please select the PRIMARY issues on which you personally work. You may choose more than one.** (2012 N=1,207; 2019 N=625)

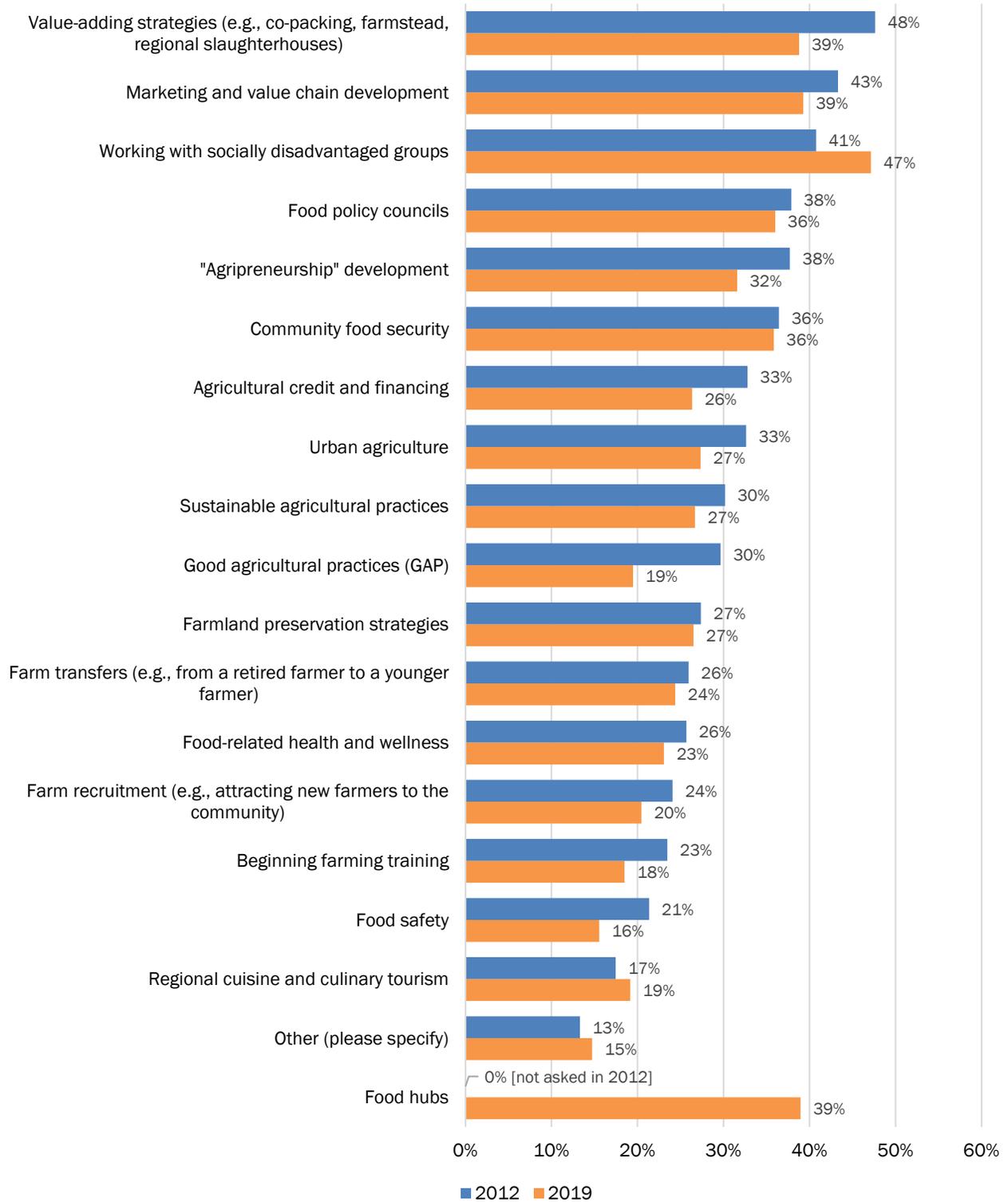


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## Training Needs

Those interested in supporting FSD professionals with training and other support need to be informed about their changing training needs. Clearly the training needs identified in 2012 still persist with mainly minor changes in both the percentage and rank order of the needs (see Figure 6, below). The level of need actually declined across all given topics, except for “working with socially disadvantaged groups” and “regional cuisine and culinary tourism.” Curiously, the reported need for training in Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) was notably lower, by 11 percentage points. We did not ask about food hubs in 2012, but its rank was near the top in training interest in 2019.

**Figure 6. Select all of the food system development activities that you feel you need additional training in (percentages). (2012 N=1,180; 2019 N=611)**

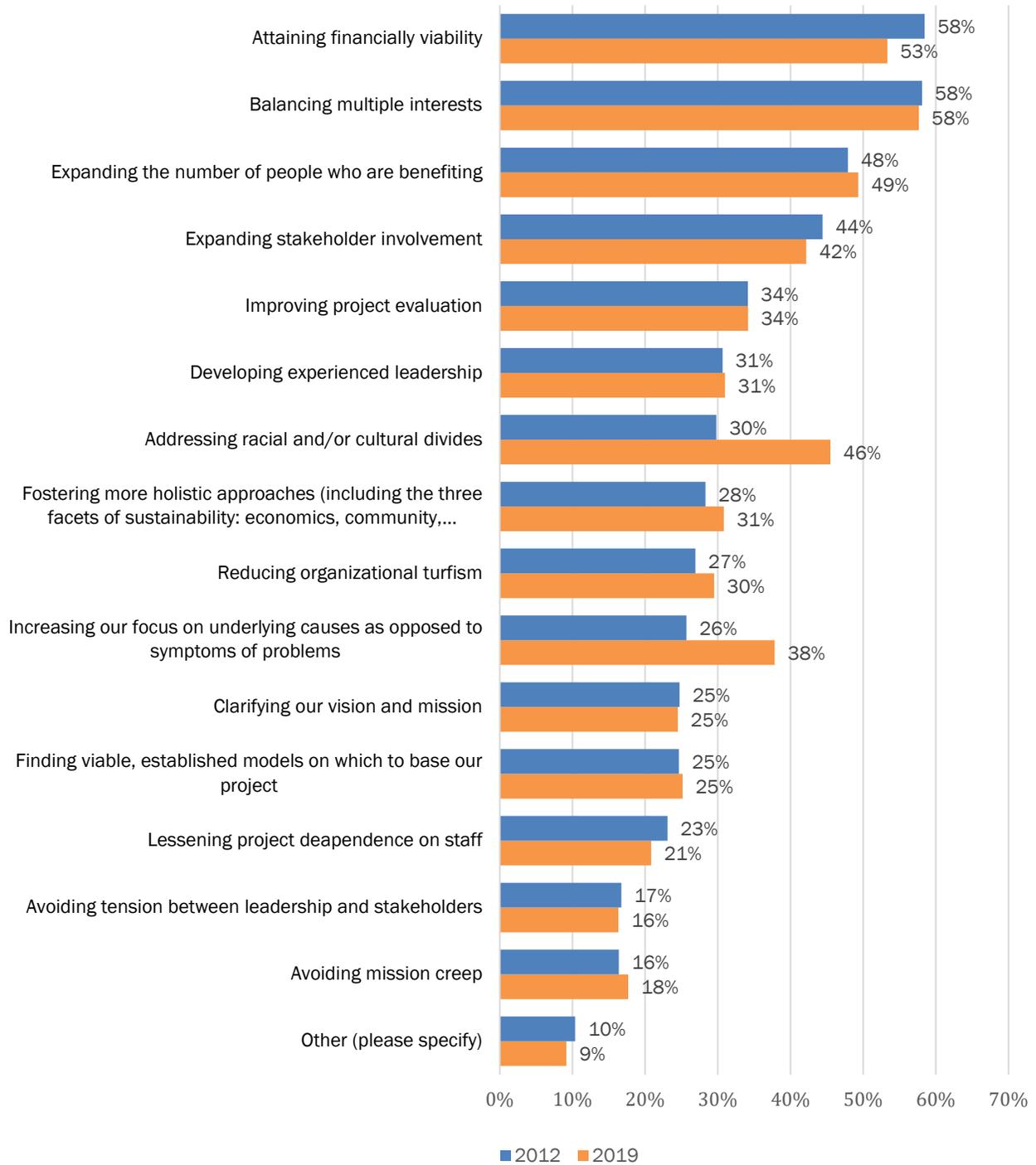


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### **Current Challenges Faced**

Organizations working in challenged communities often experience challenges themselves. To develop training opportunities for FSD professionals that also build the capacity of the organizations in which they work, we wanted to know more about the challenges that their organizations face. While “attaining financial viability” and “balancing multiple interests” continue to be the leading challenges, “addressing racial and/or cultural divides” and “increasing our focus on underlying causes as opposed to symptoms of problems” were both notably higher in 2019. See Figure 7.

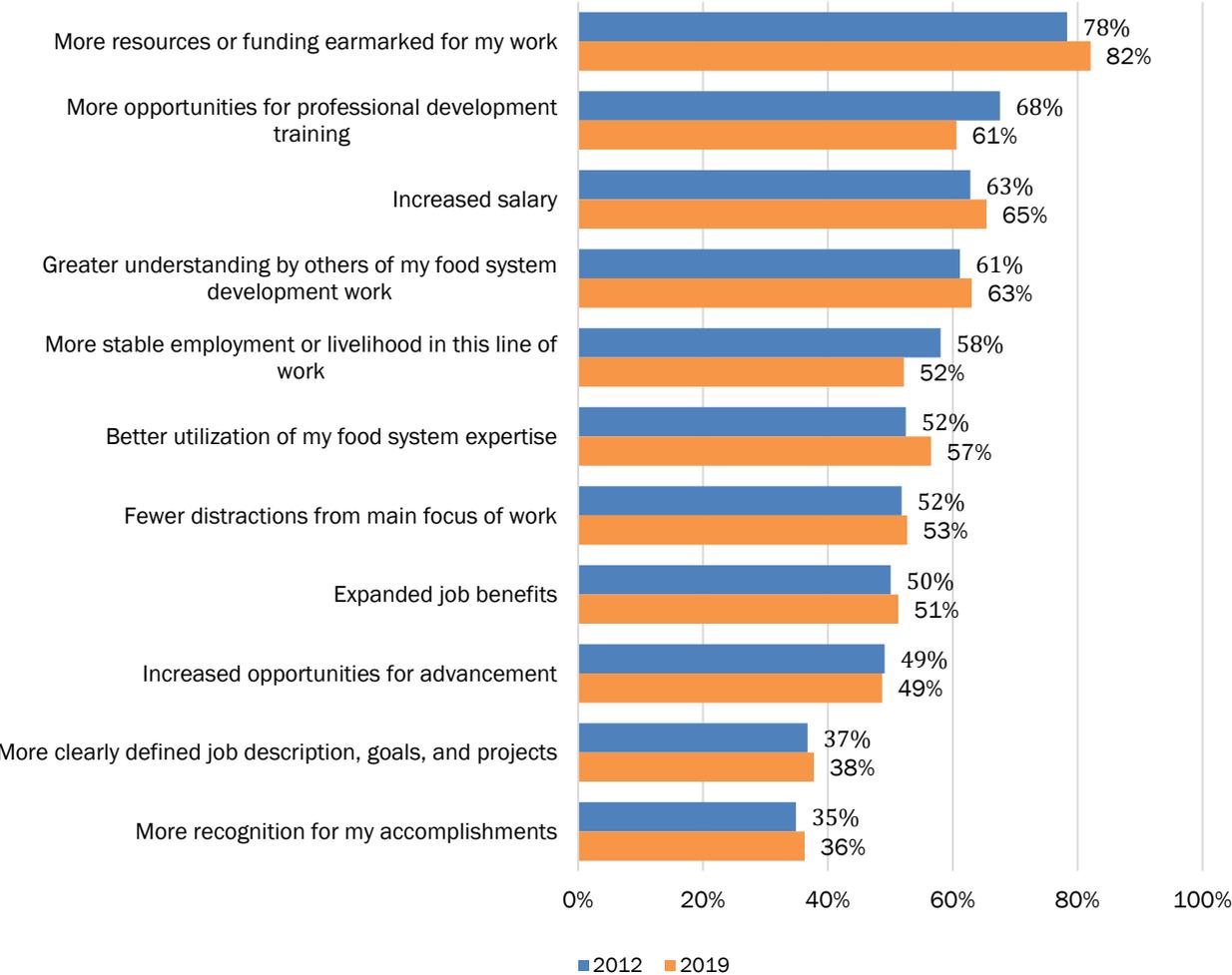
**Figure 7. Select all of the CHALLENGES your project, program, organization, or business faces at this time (percentages). (2012 N=1,148; 2019 N=600)**



### Changes Desired for Professional Satisfaction

We also wanted to know more about the types of changes in current work situations that our respondents thought would improve their personal and professional satisfaction. “More resources or funding earmarked for my work” continued to be the leading change desired for professional satisfaction, while, notably, “More opportunities for professional development training” declined by 7 percentage points. This information should be helpful in developing training programs that address concerns for personal and professional growth. Figure 8 shows little change between 2012 and 2019.

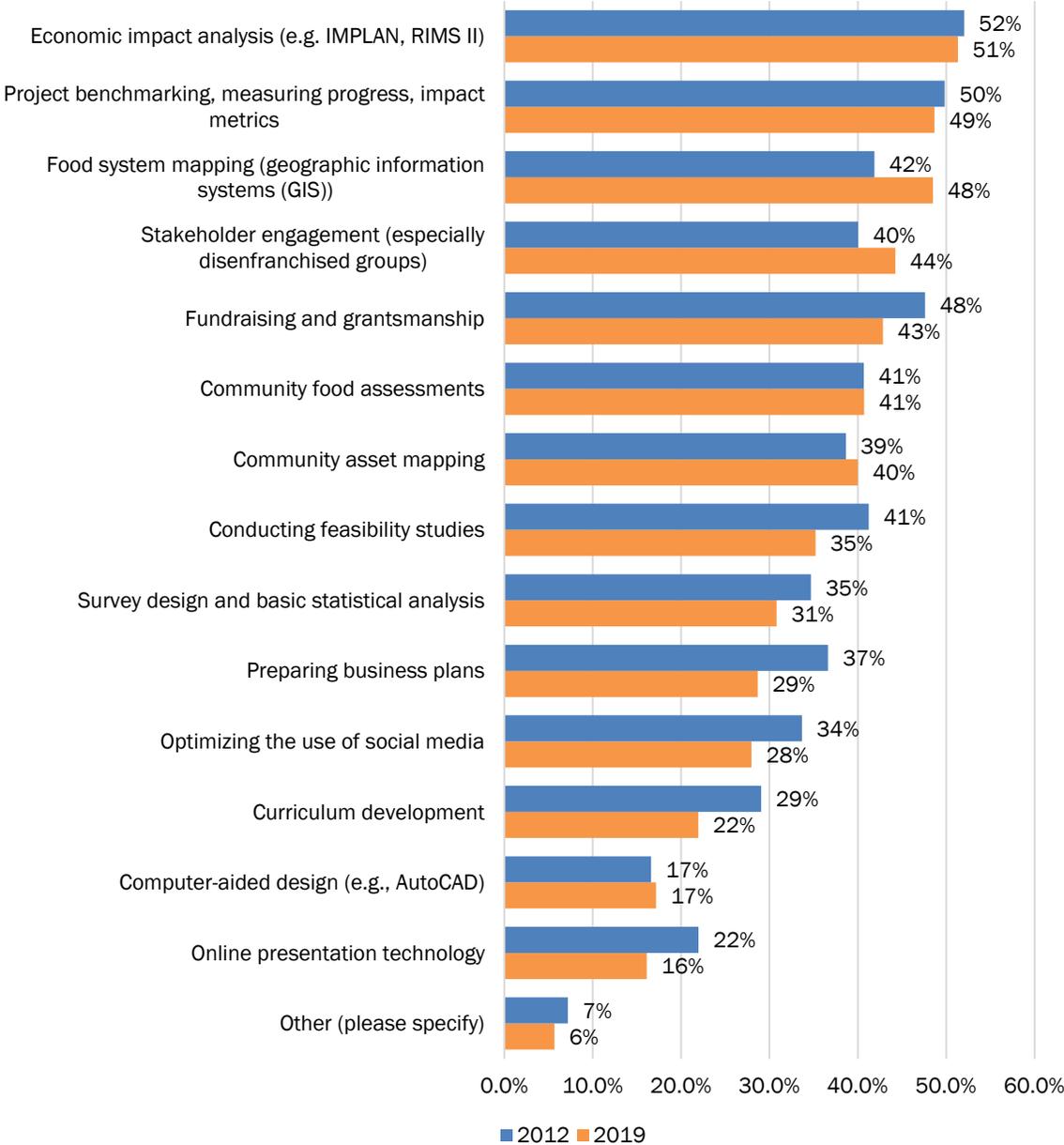
**Figure 8. Percentage of respondents who indicated they desired moderate to significant change in their current work situation.** (2012 N=1,021–1,054; 2019 N=535–558)



### Technical Skills Training Desired

In addition to the training needs identified in Figures 6, we wanted to know more about the technical training needs respondents felt they needed to become more highly skilled FSD practitioners (see Figure 9). While training in economic impact analysis and project benchmarking remained the top technical skills training sought, the levels of interest in training opportunities in food system mapping (GIS), asset mapping, and shareholder engagement of disenfranchised groups were higher in 2019.

**Figure 9. Select the technical skills you believe you need training in.** (2012 *N*=1,084; 2019 *N*=565)

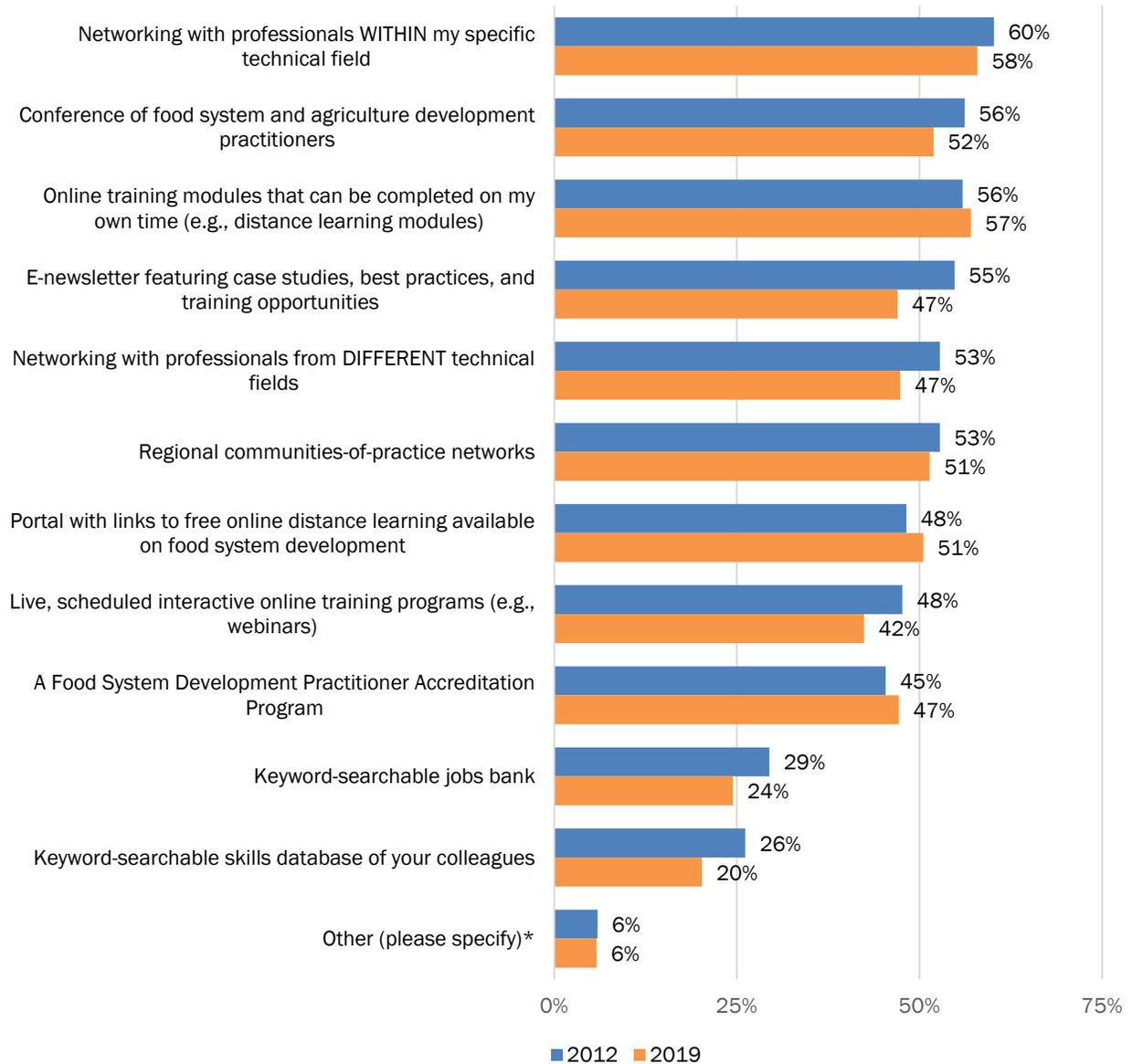


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### **Professional Development Needs and Interests**

It is one thing to provide training opportunities and another to have such opportunities organized to appeal to those who could make use of that training. Thus, we wanted to get a sense of how FSD professionals would like to receive training and to share their knowledge with others in the field. Figure 10 shows that interest in networking with professionals within their specific technical fields continues to be the most popular professional development opportunity sought, but that respondents preferred a wide range of approaches. This reinforces a need to tailor programs to make them compatible with their target audiences and/or to provide different avenues for program participation. It is worth noting that, while interest in conferences declined modestly, interest in online training increased—a shift that is likely to continue in post-pandemic North America.

**Figure 10. Select the following professional development forums and opportunities you would likely participate in if they become available. (2012 N=1,093; 2019 N=568)**



\* In the 2012 survey, there was a twelfth response option: A paid leave of absence program for food system professionals and activists who are working on social justice issues. This would include support in documenting their front-line expertise and knowledge. (See more on this below.)

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### **Interest in Paid Leave-of-Absence (Sabbatical) Program**

In the 2019 survey (but not in the 2012 survey), we asked if FSD professionals who considered themselves “food justice activists” might be interested in a paid leave-of-absence (sabbatical) program. This program, proposed by Christine Porter of the University of Wyoming, would allow activists to participate in professional development activities such as writing and publishing reflective essays, program materials, guides, and strategic plans.

Nearly two-thirds of the 2019 respondents responded affirmatively to the item “Do you consider yourself a food justice activist? That is, someone who works on issues related to racial equity and inclusion?” (59.6% of the valid  $n$  of 653 on the item). Of the 389 who identified as food justice activists, about two-thirds (65.8%) responded affirmatively to the item “As a food justice activist, would you be interested in a paid leave-of-absence program (sabbatical) that includes support in documenting your front-line expertise and knowledge?” Of course, taking a leave could be disruptive or inconvenient, and so in an open-ended question we asked respondents to comment on what their organization would need to support a sabbatical for them (see Figure 11). Money to support the sabbatical, replacement staff, training, and time were the top needs reported, but the wide range of responses suggest that sabbaticals would need to be structured to fit specific situations.

**Figure 11. Please describe what you and (if relevant) your organization would need for you to succeed in creating knowledge products (e.g., papers, videos, guides) while taking a break from front-line work. Feel free to add any additional comments or questions. (N=157)**

<b>Response Codes</b>	<b>No.</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Money	49	31%
Staffing (Fill missing roles and replace other areas of work)	33	21%
Training (Support organization with guidance creating knowledge products)	21	13%
Time	18	11%
Network (Community of practitioners to start discussion on what's been done, what needs to be done, and how these resources can be best delivered)	14	9%
Resources (Technical equipment to streamline information, produce videos, distribute content, etc.)	11	7%
"I don't know"	11	7%
<b>Total responses</b>	<b>157</b>	

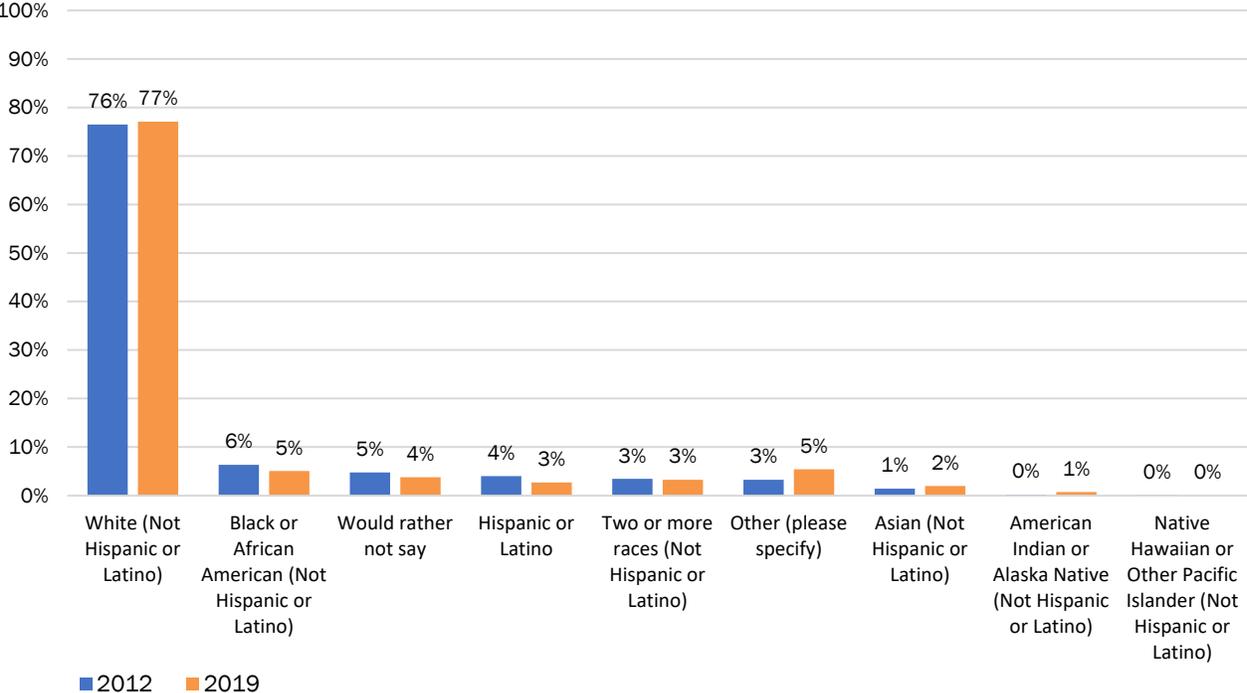
### Demographics of Respondents

To better design and target potential programs, we wanted to know more about the demographic characteristics of the FSD professionals who responded to our survey.

#### Race and Ethnicity

The percentage and rank order of racial and ethnic categories in 2019 remained about the same as in 2012 (see Figure 12), with the majority of respondents identifying as non-Hispanic white. Given the disproportionate impact of food system issues on communities of color, this suggests the need for more diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives in recruitment and hiring practices throughout the nascent profession.

**Figure 12. How do you identify your race or ethnicity?** (2012 N=1,072; 2019 N=554)



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### *Gender*

Similarly, the responses to the question “Please tell us your gender” (2012  $N=1,077$ ; 2019  $N=550$ ) yielded the same gender distribution of respondents in 2012 and 2019, with 73% identifying as female, 24% identifying as male, and 3% preferring not to say. With women outnumbering men as respondents three to one, this raises several questions about the FSD field, including whether the work appeals more to women than to men and whether men were simply less willing to respond to the survey. In any case, it suggests a need to tailor training opportunities to meet the particular needs of women, such as providing childcare support and examining concerns about gender-related income gaps in FSD work compared to other professions.

### *Location*

Survey respondents came from all over North America. Not surprisingly, some of the U.S. states with larger populations had more respondents, but in 2012 the highest share of respondents (10%) hailed from Michigan, while in 2019 Minnesota generated the most respondents (11%). (See Figure 13.) A potentially fruitful topic of future research would be to get a better handle on where FSD professionals are located and to investigate what state or provincial policies and conditions might be related to the practice of FSD.

Figure 13. What state or province are you located in? (2012 *N*=1,077; 2019 *N*=555)

State or Province	2012	2019
MI	10%	5%
CA	8%	5%
WI	7%	3%
NY	6%	6%
IL	5%	3%
NC	4%	4%
MA	4%	3%
Ontario	4%	2%
VT	3%	1%
WA	3%	3%
British Columbia	3%	5%
Other (please specify)	3%	3%
OR	2%	2%
PA	2%	4%
VA	2%	3%
WY	2%	1%
IA	2%	1%
MN	2%	11%
MD	1%	1%
FL	1%	2%
MO	1%	2%
NV	1%	0%
UT	1%	1%
CT	1%	1%
IN	1%	2%
OH	1%	2%
CO	1%	1%
TX	1%	1%
KY	1%	1%
NH	1%	1%
NM	1%	0%
AL	1%	0%

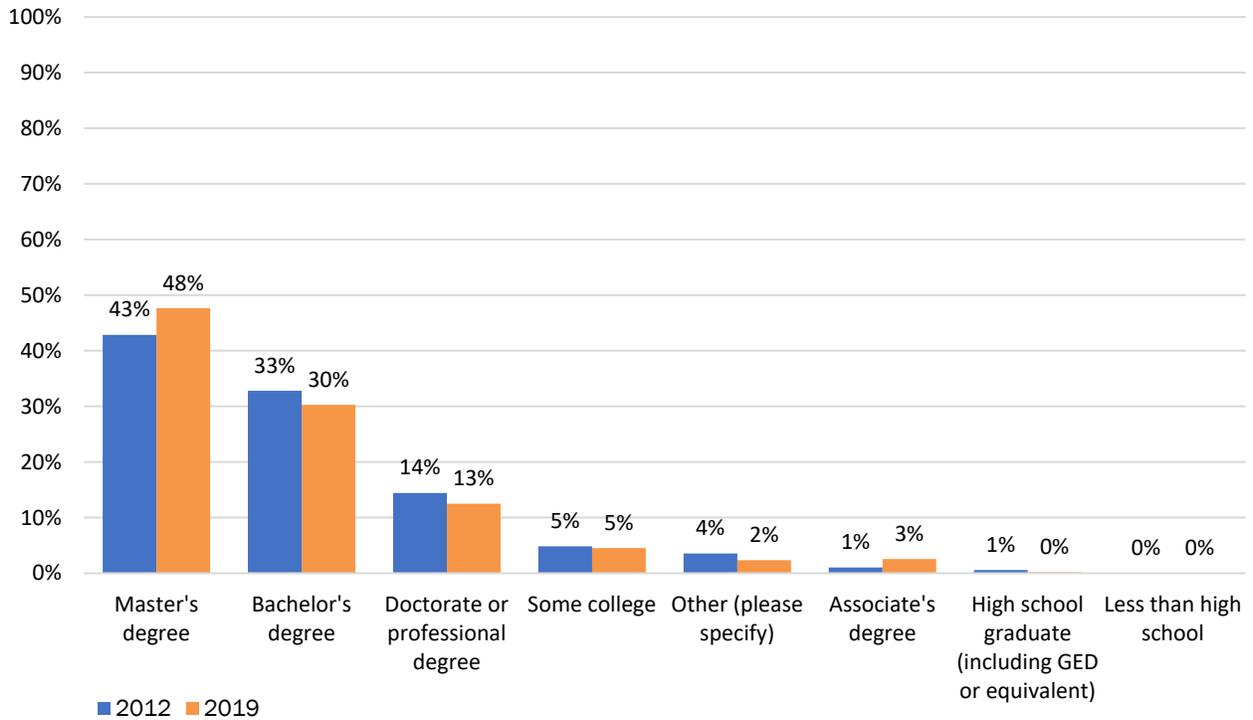
  

State or Province	2012	2019
AZ	1%	3%
GA	1%	0%
ME	1%	1%
LA	1%	1%
Yukon	1%	0%
AR	1%	0%
NJ	1%	1%
SC	1%	0%
TN	1%	0%
Manitoba	1%	0%
Newfoundland and Labrador	1%	0%
OK	0%	1%
RI	0%	0%
WV	0%	1%
Saskatchewan	0%	0%
ID	0%	2%
MS	0%	0%
MT	0%	0%
Wash. D.C.	0%	2%
AK	0%	1%
HI	0%	1%
KS	0%	1%
ND	0%	0%
U.S. Territories	0%	0%
Quebec	0%	0%
SD	0%	0%
Nova Scotia	0%	1%
Prince Edward Island	0%	0%
DE	0%	0%
NE	0%	1%
Puerto Rico	0%	0%
Alberta	0%	1%
New Brunswick	0%	0%

## Education

FSD professionals are highly educated overall, with a growing share of respondents having reported receiving a master's degree (see Figure 14). Of course, it is possible that professionals with higher degrees were more likely to respond to the surveys.

**Figure 14. What is your educational attainment?** (2012  $N=1,076$ ; 2019  $N=552$ )



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## Conclusions

The results of our 2012 and 2019 surveys were remarkably consistent overall, suggesting that many challenges continue to hamper FSD professionals' work. However, with the baseline and a second set of data points, we now have a better understanding of what types of trainings and other professional development support would advance FSD as a profession and aid its practitioners in their work and career development.

Both topical skills (e.g., food hubs, working with socially disadvantaged groups) and technical skills (e.g., economic impacts analysis and project benchmarking) are in highest demand. However, issues related to racial equity are growing in importance. Our surveys also suggest that many practitioners want increased convenience and flexibility in the way they receive professional development training—including the more privileged respondents who already had the time and access to information and resources needed to complete these surveys.

We acknowledge that a significant limitation of our study is our limited base of information. As a relatively new profession, FSD covers a wide range of subject matter foci and organizational contexts. We recognize that perhaps thousands of individuals who might have qualified as FSD professionals did not complete our surveys for unknown reasons. These individuals may not have the time or resources to participate; they may not be engaged in national networks and listservs that would have brought the surveys to their attention; or perhaps they were not motivated to participate—not convinced that their effort would help them. As the field of FSD matures, a better grasp of its characteristics and practitioners will be needed. We think our surveys will contribute toward achieving those insights.

Individual FSD practitioners and organizations with less bandwidth (e.g., time or funding) to participate in national conferences and scheduled live training webinars will become less competitive in employment and in securing grants for their communities unless new, more flexible training approaches and pedagogy are used. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic that resulted in stay-at-home orders in 2020–2021, we are likely to find that there is greater willingness and capacity among FSD practitioners to participate in virtual trainings. With the

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shift to working remotely, many workers and their employers have increased their technological capacity and become comfortable with—or even embraced—new ways of learning and networking. Nevertheless, NAFSN, its founding partners, governments, and allied programs must explore creative outreach and “in-reach” strategies to amplify the voices and needs of these practitioners, and especially those working and living in disinvested communities, to make sure that knowledge and skills gaps in food systems development do not continue to widen.

